A Woman's Place

By Rahel Musleah

In the House, the Senate, city and state office and working behind the scenes, Jewish women make their mark in American politics.

Debbie Wasserman Schultz faced long odds when she ran for the Florida State House of Representatives in 1992. New to Broward County, she had limited funds and was only 26 years old. But after knocking on 25,000 doors in six months, the young Democrat was elected with 53 percent of the vote in a six-way race on the first ballot. "Nobody expected me to win, including me," she says.

After 12 years in office (the last four as a state senator), Wasserman Schultz has gained self-confidence as well as credibility among her constituents and colleagues: She ran for the U.S. Congress this November. "I've grown up," she says simply. "I've spent my entire adult life as a legislator."

Debbie Wasserman Schultz (left) is regarded as a rising star in Democratic ranks, even though she has yet to reach Congress. Other Jewish women who have taken the plunge into the world of politics, from the federal to the local level, include (top row, from left), Allyson Schwartz, Pennsylvania state senator and U.S. congressional candidate; Florence Shapiro, Texas state senator; Francine "Frankie" Goldberg, councilwoman-at-large, University Heights, Ohio; (bottom row, from left) Fran Katz Watson, political fund-raising consultant; Laurie Moskowitz, grassroots campaign organizer; Linda Lingle, governor of Hawaii; and Dr. Ruth Mandel, director of Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics.

DANIEL PORTNOY

Along with a handful of other candidates, Wasserman Schultz hopes to swell the ranks of Jewish women in Congress. Until this past election, the number of Jewish women in the 108th Congress totaled seven: Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, both from California, and Representatives Shelley Berkley (Nev.), Susan Davis and Jane Harman (Calif.), Nita Lowey (N.Y.) and Jan Schakowsky (Ill.). All are Democrats.

"Jews—men and women—are taking advantage of the promise of democracy, which offers the opportunity to participate and to have a voice in public policy," says Dr. Ruth Mandel, director of Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics and former director of Eagleton's Center for American Women and Politics.

While those at the federal level may be most visible, Jewish women, like women in general, have moved into American politics at all levels—from mayors of municipalities and state officials to behind-the-scenes fund-raisers, organizers, advisers, lobbyists, pollsters and public relations consultants. Interested in the larger community, they are problem-solvers who get things done; they network and belong to many organizations, Mandel says. They tend to be "more educated and affluent than not."

Jewish women were visible activists in the women's movement and founders of the National Women's Political Caucus, established in 1971 to increase the number of women in political life. Bella Abzug became a household name. Women in general now constitute 14 percent of the U.S. Congress (up from 3 percent in the early '70s) and 22 to 25 percent of state elected officials. "There is slow progress, but no parity yet," says Mandel.

These women hold positions in places one might expect—New York, California and Florida—but also in geographically less predictable areas, such as Portland, Ore. (Mayor Vera Katz), and Hawaii (Gov. Linda Lingle). They have reached the upper echelons of campaign strategy and national leadership: Susan Estrich was the first woman to serve as a presidential campaign manager (for Michael Dukakis). Ann Lewis is national chair of the Women's Vote Center for the Democratic National Committee and was White House director of communications from 1997 to 2000.

Allyson Schwartz

Whatever their positions, the women we interviewed for this article cite similar motivations: They want to make a difference. Many got their first taste of politics in high school and college student government before they decided to channel their professional energies into "making the world a better place," in Wasserman Schultz's words.

Running for office is a leap from anything else you do.

Florence Shapiro

Far from training them to be hard-boiled politicians, their Jewish backgrounds taught them optimism and idealism, nourishing their decisions to serve their communities, to use their activism to prevent another Holocaust, to fight for Israel and Soviet Jewry and to protect human rights. Raised mostly in Reform and Conservative households, they maintain synagogue affiliations today.

"I understood the effect government can have on the individual and society," says Allyson Schwartz, 56, a Pennsylvania state senator and U.S. Congress candidate whose mother was a Holocaust survivor. With a master's degree in social work, Schwartz began her public service career in 1973, helping to establish nonprofit, affordable health services to Philadelphians. She went on to found Philadelphia's first women's health center and was later appointed first deputy commissioner of the Philadelphia Department of Human Services.

Realizing the impact of government on health care, Schwartz decided to run against the incumbent Republican candidate for state senate. During her 14 years in office, she spearheaded the effort in the Senate to create the landmark Pennsylvania Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which has served as a model for providing coverage to children of middle-class families.

"Running for office is a leap from anything else you do," Schwartz says. "We continue to see small numbers [of women] in elected office at the state and federal levels. It's still an uphill fight."

Despite the strides women have made,

Francine Goldberg

Mandel agrees, young women are not seeking office in equal proportion to young men. A recent study by the Eagleton Center found that of 814 elected officials 35 and under in 2002, only 14 percent were women. Though some diversification has taken place in age, profession, race and ethnicity, Mandel concludes that women might not see elected office as an option they can balance with family life and often postpone it until their children are older.

Wasserman Shultz is an exception to that finding. When Peter Deutsch ran for Congress in 1992, he encouraged Wasserman Schultz, then a legislative aide, to run for his vacated seat in the Florida House. She had just gotten married and purchased a home. "The issues people in my generation were facing were underrepresented," she says: the struggle for homeownership, the quality of public school education, access to health care. "I felt I could add my voice. Unless you are living it, it is less likely you will champion these causes. I had children while in office, so family and child-care issues became important."

The mother of five-year-old twins and a one-year-old, Wasserman Schultz feels her situation is more challenging than that of women in politics whose children are grown or of women in other fields who balance family and professional obligations. Five months a year, she commutes 450 miles a week from her home in a Fort Lauderdale suburb to the state capital of Tallahassee. This year, she brought along the baby, Shelby, so she could nurse and care for her in a separate room she requested be built in her Senate office.

Linda Lingle

In her run for the House of Representatives, Wasserman Schultz has continued her door-to-door campaign strategy. "The personal connection gives women an edge as candidates," she says, adding that women often have to work harder than men to accomplish the same goals. "I might not win an issue on its merits, but it won't be because I was outworked." The anti-Semitic hate mail she sometimes receives doesn't sway her: "If you stay true to your principles, some people won't like it."

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Florence Shapiro, 56, a Republican state senator from Texas and a child of survivors, recalls being "devastated" by a swastika painted on one of her billboards during her 1992 campaign. Her district included Dallas, but also stretched to rural East Texas. "Very few people there had ever seen a Republican; fewer had seen a female Republican, and even fewer a Jewish female Republican," she says. "They weren't quite sure what to make of me." Her opponent's brochures depicted his family and himself, Bible in hand, outside a church. When Shapiro won the race in a runoff, she became the second Jewish senator in Texas history (the other was a male Democrat). She has since run three times, unopposed, and has not faced a recurrence of anti-Semitism.

Shapiro learned leadership in her own family life from an early age. She became her "parents' parent," guiding them in a foreign country (America) whose language they didn't speak. Her gregarious nature and need to be accepted motivated her to try out for activities unusual for Jewish girls, like cheerleading. She majored in English in college, married and became a public school teacher and an active volunteer in Plano, a Dallas suburb. She even founded the Plano Junior League.

She had no political aspirations until 1979, when the only woman on her community's city council chose not to seek re-election. Because of Shapiro's civic involvement, people asked her to run. She responded: "What does the City Council do?" After 11 years on the council, she was elected mayor, and became president of the Texas Municipal League.

Her strong Jewish commitment continues to shape Shapiro's policies: She helped pass the Texas Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which makes it difficult for state and local regulations to restrict religious freedoms, and organized the first Yom Hashoah ceremony at the State Capitol in 2003. "Jewish women are always activists in some way: in their children's schools, in synagogues and Jewish

organizations," she says. "Organizational leadership prepares you for politics. That's the route I took."

To be Jewish, female and Republican is an unusual combination in elected office. Shapiro lives in a Republican stronghold, so her political affiliation is not surprising. She is a "good friend" of President George W. Bush: "I was his senator before he ran for governor of Texas." Before Bush visited the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington in 2001, he invited the Shapiro family to the White House for dinner in his living quarters; they later accompanied him to the museum.

Hawaii's governor, Linda Lingle, also is a Republican. A journalist and former mayor of Maui, the St. Louis native moved in 1975 to Hawaii, which has a 7,000-member Jewish community.

Francine "Frankie" Goldberg, councilwoman-at-large in University Heights, Ohio, says that the leadership programs of B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO) "served as a catalyst for my future in politics." To Goldberg, who also gained political experience through the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), at a state senator's office and in local campaigns, "law was an extension of the political world"; she is an assistant county prosecutor. She says she believes in the adage "All politics is local" but would keep her options for higher office open.

Goldberg, 40, blends her modern Orthodox home with her politics. A supportive spouse is indispensable, she stresses. Two of her four children (ages one to 13) sometimes campaign with her door-to-door. "They get to see the process firsthand," says Goldberg. "They pass out literature, shake voters' hands and hear the concerns. And because I'm sometimes away up to four nights a week, this is a chance to be together." Campaigning also exposes the children to a diverse community beyond the yeshiva they attend.

PAUL J. RICHARDS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Girl Power

Ilana Wexler is already a political role model—and she is only 12 years old. The Oakland, Calif., teen started her own organization, Kids for Kerry, addressed the Democratic National Convention in July and gave up summer camp to work for Kerry's campaign.

After her parents—Jonathan, a CPA, and Heidi, a drama therapist—returned from a fund-raiser smitten with Teresa Heinz Kerry, Ilana founded her organization, which grew to some 3,000-strong. Heinz Kerry later proposed that Ilana address the convention.

The girl's goal in the election was to "get the swing voters out. If they see a child advocating for them to vote, they'll see how easy it is. If a child can make a difference, they will see that they can make a difference with their vote." She also initiated National No Name-Calling Day, Sept. 21, urging candidates to follow a moratorium on saying anything negative about one another.

Ilana, who will become bat mitzvah in April, says she learned the value of making a difference through giving tzedakah at home on Friday nights. "I'd like to work in politics," she says, looking ahead. "Something for my state—maybe a cabinet position." She is also considering teaching or broadcasting.

If more girls and women followed Ilana's lead, the political system would probably look a lot different.—R.M.

Fran Katz Watson

Alongside the women in the public eye stand their volunteers, strategists and fund-raisers. In the frenetic pace of behind-the-scenes politics, few are over 40. The field naturally narrows when they get married and have children, or decide to go on to graduate school or advocacy positions, or open their own companies. Job insecurity between campaigns is a drawback for those who desire stability as they get older.

Many of the Jewish women behind the scenes specialize in fund raising. Historically, Mandel says, "women have raised money for good causes, but the transition into asking for money for themselves was often uncomfortable." Political action committees and campaign funds specifically to support women (such as EMILY's List) were born.

Fran Katz Watson, 40, began her own fund-raising consulting firm after helping elect several congresspeople, working for AIPAC and serving as financial director for the Democratic National Committee. Her clients vary by election cycle. Currently they include the Democratic Leadership Council, the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee and the National Jewish Democratic Council. She was Senator Joseph Lieberman's senior adviser when he ran for the Democratic presidential nomination (he is still a client). "I either advise people on how to raise money, put people with money in touch with them, or vice versa," says Katz Watson, now the mother of two. "There's a lot of shmoozing."

As a teenager, she was very involved in Jewish life and the Soviet Jewry cause. "That's what brought me to Washington. It was all about Israel, changing the world and eradicating hunger. Running for office never appealed to me."

Laurie Moskowitz

Laurie Moskowitz, who manages grass-roots "field programs" for candidates and organizations, says that "from the time I was small, I wanted to be involved in campaigns and elections. Who controls laws and sets policy is central to how we live our lives." Moskowitz, a Jewish Women International board of trustees member who is in her late 30s, also attributes her activism to her teenage participation in Soviet Jewry rallies and BBYO.

Through her firm, FieldWorks, Moskowitz arranges direct voter contact, phone and personal campaigns, and house meetings for clients that include the Democratic National Committee (the Kerry campaign), EMILY's List, the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters. In 2000, she ran the national field campaign for Al Gore. "I organize the organizers," she says. "I do strategy and planning. Other people raise money; I spend money." Moskowitz and her husband, a public relations consultant, have two children under the age of three.

Encouraging the next generation to get involved remains an abiding aim for the current batch of political women. Realizing they serve as role models, they speak at schools, sponsor scholarships for girls and encourage young women to stop by their offices and to participate in the nationwide American Legion Auxiliary Girls' State Program, open to high school juniors, which simulates city, county and state levels of government.

For now, the biggest challenge remains recruitment, says Mandel. Political organizations and networks must view women as viable candidates and women themselves must absorb the message: "It's not some other woman we need. It's you." JW

Ruth Mandel

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